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NOTE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE IN MEDIAEVAL MEDICINE

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THE prominence of the Jews in the practice of medicine during the Middle Ages is well known. As medical teachers, as translators and as authors, they took high rank. Their literary work is chiefly associated with the Arabic School. Yet a large part of their medical writings were written in Hebrew or were translated into that language. The best evidence of this is to be found in the works of Steinschneider, in his catalogues of the Hebrew MSS. in the libraries of Berlin, Munich, and Oxford, and especially in the chapter on Medicine in his *Hebräische Uebersetzungen*.

The relatively large number of Hebrew medical writings in themselves furnish the proof of the important part which Hebrew played in the diffusion of medical knowledge. There are other facts, however, which bear similar testimony in a striking manner.

(a)

In his decree published May 30, 1497, King Manuel of Portugal gave permission to Jewish physicians and surgeons to study Hebrew medical books under certain conditions: 'And furthermore it is our pleasure that such physicians and surgeons as have been and as

shall be converted and do not know Latin, may keep Hebrew books relating to their profession ; and this is to be understood as relating to those who are at present surgeons and physicians and have not yet become Christians, but who will become Christians in the future and (it is) not (to be understood as relating) to any others.¹

(b)

Another reference, bearing even more striking evidence of the importance of Hebrew medical writings is found in an address of Peter Schade, otherwise known as Petrus Mosellanus. This address was entitled *Oratio de variarum linguarum cognitione paranda*, and was delivered in Leipzig in August, 1518. The copy in my possession was published in August, 1519.² On p. 49 there is the following statement :

Nunc vero ad salutarem illam et naturae ipsius velut consiliariam medendi artem progrediamur. Haec professio ut est omnium utilissima et mortalibus necessaria, ita tota ex linguarum cognitione pendet. Nam cum omnium gen-

¹ The decree is to be found republished in full in Kayserling's *Geschichte der Juden in Portugal*, Leipzig, 1867, p. 347. The sentence in the original is as follows :—'e asy mesmo nos praz que hos fisykos, e solorgiaes que ssam convertidos e sse converterem, e senao ssouberem latim possam ter livros de artes em ebraico ; e ysto sse emtemdera nos que aguora ssao solorgiaes, e fisykos amtes de serem convertidos, e sse tornarem chrisptaos, e outros nenhys nao.'

² Mosellanus was born in 1493 in Bruttig on the Mosel river. He studied in Cologne and Erfurt and later in Leipzig. In 1517 he became professor of Greek and Latin at the last-named university and subsequently its rector. He was a prolific writer and must have been a remarkable man to have become as distinguished as he was in but a few years ; for he died when only thirty-one years of age. An account of his life is found in *Allgem. Deutsche Biographie*, vol. XXII, p. 358.

tium hominibus sint morbi communes, remedia quoque contra hos pro vario linguarum genere varie sunt tradita. Quae diligenter ubique rimari, an non fuerit medico gnavo iucundissimum, commodissimumque? Qui autem rimabitur si linguarum sit imperitus? An non ut omnes aliae et haec ars primum omnium a Iudaeis est percepta et hinc Iudaico sermone conscripta? Latet adeo in Hebraeorum bibliothecis rei medicae thesaurus ingens, ut nullius alterius linguae libris aequari posse videatur. Eum citra Hebraicae grammaticae cognitionem in lucem eruere poterit nemo. Hic mentior, si non et gravissimi homines et inter Christianos linguarum peritissimi nostrae sententiae subscribunt et principes ut quisque maximus est et cordatissimus, medicos quoque Iudaeos sibi asciscunt. Quis enim nescit, Fridericum Romanorum Imperatorem eius nominis tertium, Iudaicae medicinae potissimum beneficio in imperio annos supra quinquaginta vixisse? Non et Iulio Secundo Pontif. Max. vitam ab omnibus pene deploratam, arte sua Iudaeus ille medicus prorogavit? Quin et hodie non sine Latini imo et Christiani nominis infamia, non raro a nostris medicis ad Iudaeos *provocatur*. Pudet perfecto, pudet a Iudaeis expectari quod in Christianis desyderetur. Quo autem modo Christianus, non multis partibus libentius valetudinem suam credet medico Christiano, si modo eandem medendi rationem ex Iudaeorum fontibus hauserit? Et quid vetat, quo minus felici ingenii adolescentes Christiani, huic professioni destinati pauculis annis, imo, si adsit discendi ardens libido, mensibus eam linguam, quatenus ad iudicandum, intelligendumque satis est, condiscate? Doctissimus ille Origenes, sanctissimus Hieronymus, quamquam iam decies fere veteris instrumenti libris in Latinum sermonem conversis, ad sinceriores tamen theologiae cognitionem, ille senex,

hic iuvenis maturus Hebraeorum alphabetum discere nec erubuerunt, viri tanti, nec desperaverunt natu grandes: et nos adolescentes ac pueri quo rem medicam, in qua non sine vitae periculo aliquid nescitur, syncerius liceat tractare, idem praestare cunctamur? . . .

Ergo si turpe Christiano Iudaeis in arte sua cedere, si pudendum professionis suae duces non intelligere, si indecorum in suo negotio barbarum videri, quid restat optimi iuvenes, quotquot huic ordini nomen dedistis, quin ad linguarum studium, quo haec omnia devitare poteritis, accingamini? ³

This may be rendered in English as follows:

Now let us proceed to that salutary art of medicine, the art which, so to speak, acts as advisor of nature herself. This profession, as it is the most useful of all, and necessary to mortals, so it depends entirely on a knowledge of languages. For, since diseases are common to men of all nations, remedies for these have been handed down in various fashions according to the different nature of languages. And would it not be most pleasing and appropriate for a diligent physician carefully to search out these things everywhere? And yet who will search them out if he is unskilled in languages? Has not this art, like all other, been learned first of all by the Jews and thence written down in the Jewish language? There lies hidden in the libraries of the Jews a treasure of medical lore so great that it seems incapable of being surpassed by the books of any other language. This (treasure) no one

³ I am greatly indebted to Professor Alexander Marx for having called my attention to this interesting oration and to Professor David S. Blondheim and Mr. C. H. Coffin for aid in translation.

without a knowledge of Hebrew grammar could bring forth into the light. And I am mistaken if the most reverend men and those among the Christians who are most skilled in languages do not concur in my opinion, and if the chief men, as they are all very great and very prudent, do not receive Jewish physicians unto themselves. Who is ignorant of the fact that Frederick, Emperor of the Romans, the third of that name, ruled the empire more than fifty years by virtue of the service rendered to him by Jewish medical skill? And also that famous Jewish doctor, by his skill, prolonged life for Pope Julius II after people had almost begun to mourn for him? Nay, more, not without shame to the Latin and indeed to the Christian name, people appeal to Jews after trying our physicians. It is shameful, indeed shameful, that there should be expected of Jews what is lacking in Christians. Wherefore, will not a Christian very much more willingly entrust his health to a Christian doctor if that doctor has only learned the same method of treatment from Jewish sources? And what prevents our Christian youths of quick intelligence, who are destined for this profession, from learning this language, in a few years, or if they have a burning desire for study, in a few months, up to a point necessary for comprehending and understanding it? That most learned man, Origen, and the blessed St. Jerome, although the books of the Old Testament had been translated into Latin some ten times, nevertheless, for the purpose of (acquiring) a better knowledge of Theology, (these two men) the one an old man, the other a mature young man, were not ashamed to learn the Hebrew language, nor did these men despair of this, and we, young men and boys that we are, do we hesitate to do the same thing in order better to carry on the

medical art, in which no knowledge is neglected without danger?

Therefore, if it is base for a Christian to yield precedence to the Jews in his own art, if it is shameful not to understand the leaders of his own profession, if it is unseemly to appear uncouth in his own *métier*, what remains, oh noble youths, as many of you as have dedicated your lives to this profession, what remains, I say, but to devote yourselves to the study of languages by means of which you may avoid all those things?